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SUBJECT: POLITICAL INTRIGUE SHAPES TOMSK MAYORAL ELECTION

REF: MOSCOW 00766

Classified By: Minister Counselor Alice Wells. Reason: 1.4 (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. The mayoral campaign in Tomsk, in which ruling party candidate Nikolay Nikolaychuk narrowly defeated the independent Aleksandr Deyev in a run-off election on March 15, crystallized the relative weakening position of the party of power, United Russia, in the face of economic difficulties. The governor's ability to secure a victory for his candidate (through black PR, the use of administrative resources, and the falsification of election results) showed the still insurmountable power that the vertical of power enjoys. However, Deyev's candidacy -- financed by unknown supporters with deep pockets -- suggests deepening divisions within the elite, with a dissatisfied minority able to leverage popular discontent as a potent weapon. The election highlighted more broadly the contradictions in a system in which Moscow calls the shots and expects regional elites to "make it happen" on the ground -- an increasingly difficult task in a period of tightening budgets and economic slowdown.
End summary.

An Unexpected Runoff

¶2. (SBU) Nikolaychuk, the acting mayor of Tomsk after the incarceration of the elected city leader in 2006, failed to achieve a simple majority in the March 1 local elections, forcing a run-off with the second-place finisher Aleksandr Deyev on March 15. Deyev, a perennial critic and opposition player, enjoyed a reputation as a handsome and active politician, prone to populist rhetoric but well known to the city as the owner of the only independent newspaper -- the weekly Tomskaya Nedelya. Officially a member of the Kremlin-linked "Just Russia" party, Deyev ran as an independent, garnering far greater support than that party's pick or the weaker candidates from the KPRF and LDPR. For his part, Nikolaychuk had a reputation as a capable, if colorless, administrator who enjoyed the support of the United Russia apparatus in Tomsk and Moscow.

¶3. (SBU) The original vote gave Nikolaychuk only 40.6 percent of the unexpectedly low turnout (forecasts had predicted more than half of city voters would participate, only 37 percent went to the polls), while Deyev received a respectable 35 percent. Two weeks later, Nikolaychuk defeated his rival by 4 percentage points (about 6,000 votes) -- winning the support of 50.6 percent of the vote. Six percent more voters turned out for the runoff; a difference that our contacts attributed to either heightened popular interest or increased pressure to "get out the vote."

¶3. (C) Contacts in Tomsk agreed that Deyev's strong showing owed less to his political stature than to a growing sense of dissatisfaction in society to government policies, but they differed widely on the causes of that dissatisfaction. Aleksandr Krasnoperov, a journalist at Tomskie Novosti, argued that Deyev's support came from two sources: liberal, well-educated intellectuals (a bumper crop of which are found

in Tomsk's many universities) and, more broadly, "paternalists" -- those who expect the state to take care of them and oppose reforms that they see as weakening the social net. Nikolay Savangin, formerly of the liberal business party "SPS" and now the head of the regional office of "Pravoe Delo," gave greater weight to political motivations, commenting that many in Tomsk are tired of being treated like sheep in the political process and rebelled against the administration's heavy hand.

¶4. (C) Even United Russia blowhards like regional Duma member Aleksandr Kupriyanets admitted that the turnout for Deyev signaled problems for the administration, although the "official" line in Tomsk follows that from Moscow -- the crisis (foisted on Russia from abroad) has created some dissatisfaction on economic grounds. In a forthright assessment of the election, Governor Kress publicly admitted that strong showing for Deyev "was a vote against the acting power" and he blamed bureaucratic high-handedness for alienating the populace. He focused on the economic grumbling, promising to change the housing law so that no changes could be made to the tariffs on services without public hearings. As such, his promise for greater transparency on central economic issues echoed the populist line that Deyev had promulgated during the campaign. Vice-Mayor Aleksey Sevostianov told Embassy that economic problems, not political issues, drove the opposition campaign and had given a wake-up call to the city government. He nonetheless praised the mayoral election as evidence of Tomsk's democratic development, citing the close vote and spirited campaigning as a sign of a maturing political system.

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Dirty Pool

¶4. (C) Outside of administration officials in the regional and city offices, Tomsk political observers ascribed Nikolaychuk's victory to the triumph of political pressure and manipulation by the governor's office. The tools of political power -- the election commission, influence over most of the media (Tomsk boasts a local, independent television channel that offers an alternative view on regional politics), and the bully pulpit of the governor's office -- all were used to promote Nikolaychuk.

¶5. (C) During a roundtable discussion with Embassy with local members of Solidarity (the recently formed opposition movement headed by Garry Kasparov and Boris Nemtsov), Yabloko member Nadiya Ismagiova and Tomskaya Nedelya political editor Andrey Sokolov, and others described a litany of electoral infractions (both minor and venal) carried out in the name of the Nikolaychuk campaign. Perhaps most egregious was the Governor's behavior: in a television interview Kress stated that he simply would not work with Deyev under any circumstances and he reiterated false rumors that Deyev had been convicted and served time for corruption. (The Deputy of the Governor's Department for International and Regional Affairs Aleksey Stukanov privately told us that Kress realized that his bold refusal to work with Deyev, even if he were supported by the electorate, was a mistake and his comments may have actually strengthened opposition to the administration team.) The Central Election Commission dismissed complaints by the Deyev campaign about the Governor's actions, saying that he was only fulfilling his obligation to "inform the population about the course of elections."

¶6. (C) The full weight of the regional government's administrative levers were brought to bear on the Deyev campaign. MVD officials came to the office of Deyev's Tomskaya Nedelya with accusations that they were publishing "extremist" material and demanded to see what the paper planned to publish before the election. Deyev supporter and member of the City Duma Vasiliy Eremin complained that even

the independent TV2 channel had pulled its punches during the run-off election, most likely because of official pressure. Eremin further lamented that the student regions voted primarily for Nikolaychuk out of fear of losing the stipends or housing. When all else failed, the administration resorted to vote falsification. The election commission played familiar games with absentee ballots (almost 5,000 voters requested this method, compared to only 1,800 in the 2004 race) and the registration of homeless people, according to Deyev supporters. Perhaps more intriguing, the election commission could not explain the unexpected influx of 7,000 votes late in the day, according to the Federal Press website, suggesting ballot box stuffing on Nikolaychuk's behalf.

Aftermath

¶ 17. (C) The Deyev team continues to rail against the conduct of the elections, with Deyev himself suing for an apology from Kress for his public falsehoods about the candidate's character. Solidarity and other Deyev supporters held a silent "picket" on March 23 in which they held protest placards and passed petitions calling for President Medvedev to remove Kress from office. Estimates varied widely on the number of participants (from 300 to 1,500) but certainly not enough to shake the political order. Although the opposition planned for a more ambitious "meeting" (in which participants could take the podium and make speeches), the administration was confident enough to move forward with Nikolaychuk's inauguration on March 25.

¶ 18. (C) Although it appears doubtful that there's enough public anger to support the opposition's efforts to have the election results annulled, the mayoral campaign has given new impetus to the democratic movement. The opposition's activism compares favorably with the local branches of the Communist party and the new Kremlin-linked liberal party "Pravoe Delo" decision to back neither candidate in the runoff. Pravoe Delo's Savangin admitted that his party disagreed with the administration's conduct of the election, but was unwilling to risk the government's wrath by sticking its neck out for Deyev.

Behind the Scenes: Intra-Elite Conflict

¶ 19. (C) None of our contacts in Tomsk, from either the administration or opposition, could explain how Deyev financed his campaign, although there was considerable

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speculation about the "real" backing for his mayoral bid. Krasnoperov alleged that local businessmen, tired of being prejudiced by the system, supported Deyev in his bid for the mayor's office. He estimated that those supporters had enough clout to get Deyev on the ballot and to keep the governor's office from interfering in his yearlong campaign. In this context, Krasnoperov saw the Tomsk election as similar to those in Murmansk, Smolensk, and other cities where divisions within the elite led to unexpected competitive races.

(Septel) Eremin hypothesized that powerful players within United Russia may have conspired to support Deyev as a means to embarrass Governor Kress, with the hope that the spectacle of a "failed" mayoral election could lead Moscow to oust the 17-year veteran. Alternatively, Deyev's candidacy may have been the brainchild of United Russian political "technologists" who sought to manipulate the election against traditionally strong Communist and nationalist candidates in regional politics. However, the economic crisis caused the game to spin out of control as Deyev tapped unforeseen public dissatisfaction to challenge the "official" candidate.

¶ 10. (C) Announcements from both the governor's and mayor's offices about firings and new staff give some credence to speculation about intra-elite conflict as a hidden, yet

central component of the mayoral race. At the post election press conference, Kress announced the resignation of United Russia's regional head Vladimir Vaks and rumors are rife that Tomsk's gray cardinal (and Kress rival) Maksim Korobov, who headed the party's mayoral campaign, will soon follow. Sevostianov said that the mayor planned to make some changes as well, removing (in Sevostianov's words) those exposed in Tomskaya Nedelya as corrupt -- blaming their misuse of office as undermining support for the administration. Local press noted that Mayor Nikolaychuk publicly admitted that he was coordinating his staff changes with the governor, suggesting a unity of purpose in the cadre selections.

¶11. (C) Moscow's invisible (and sometimes far too visible) hand pulls many of the levers in Tomsk politics. Fear that the Kremlin would drop him as governor if Moscow's candidate for mayor failed to win drove Kress's heavy-handed reaction to the Deyev challenge. Regional leaders feel the weight of the center's pull more clearly than in the past, when defending regional interests often trumped the Kremlin's call. (According to Eremin, Nikolaychuk's predecessor Aleksandr Makarov was arrested for corruption after he conspired with United Russia leader Volodin to take over as the Speaker of the regional Duma -- a position still held by powerful local player Boris Maltsev.) The mayoral election, however, could precipitate a shift away from the lockstep march with Moscow. Kress's announcement that regional discussions would precede any new changes to housing services tariffs signals a new willingness to advance local interests when implementing policies -- although we will be interested to see how the Federal officials react to Kress's new plans.

BEYRLE